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ABSTRACT

The Research and Evaluation Branch of the Los Angeles Unified School District presents a bulletin to help prepare students to do their best on achievement tests. The bulletin is divided into five sections. After an introduction, section 2, "Characteristics of Today's Standardized Achievement Tests" discusses test content, test format, answer documents, machine scoring, and time limits. The next section, "Developing Student Readiness for Test Taking" includes test content readiness, test-taking skill readiness, and emotional readiness. Section 4, "Providing for Optimal Test Administration" attends to the physical setting, preparation for test administration, and the day of testing. Section 5, is a ten-item "Student Checklist for Test-Taking." (PN)

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LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
Research and Evaluation Branch

BULLETIN No. 6
April 1, 1982

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SUBJECT: HELPING STUDENTS DO THEIR BEST ON STANDARDIZED ACHIEVEMENT TESTS

I. Introduction
II. Characteristics of Today's Standardized Achievement Tests
III. Developing Student Readiness for Test Taking
IV. Providing for Optimal Test Administration
V. A Student Checklist for Test Taking

I. INTRODUCTION

A. The average student will be asked to take many standardized achievement tests in his or her 12 years in elementary and secondary school. If such test scores are to be an accurate reflection of how much the student knows about the subject being tested, the student, the student's parents, the school administrator, and the classroom teacher must all contribute.

B. School administrators and teachers have the responsibility for preparing students to do their best on achievement tests by understanding the way in which such tests are designed and scored, and by integrating that knowledge into activities which will develop student readiness for test-taking. Providing for optimal test administration will also contribute to the students' best effort.

C. The students and their parents have control over some of the elements which will help students do their best on standardized achievement tests. School administrators and teachers should make students and parents aware of their part in preparing the students for test-taking by reviewing the Student Checklist with them.

II. CHARACTERISTICS OF TODAY'S STANDARDIZED ACHIEVEMENT TESTS

A. Test Content

1. Modern achievement tests for a particular grade level are based on instructional objectives which have been identified by a review of instructional material and by the judgment of

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curriculum experts. For any grade level there are always many more instructional objectives than can be included in a single test. A further selection of those objectives which best measure skill development is made, and these are used for test item development. A list of instructional objectives is usually included in the teacher's manual for the test.

2. Criterion-referenced tests such as the District's proficiency tests (SES, PAIR, SHARP, etc.) are based on objectives as described above. A criterion or mastery score is set to identify those pupils who have met proficiency standards and those who need additional assistance.

3. Norm-referenced tests, such as CTBS, for a particular grade level include test items from grades below and above the instructional level being tested. This allows for a more adequate test score description of high and low achieving students. Such tests may be used as screening tools to identify those students who are possibly gifted or learning handicapped.

B. Test Format

Standardized achievement tests are of nearly uniform format today. Single subject subtests, such as reading or mathematics, may be taken individually--sometimes in two or three separately timed sections.

C. Answer Documents

Except at the primary grades, pupils must indicate their answer choices on an answer sheet which is separate from the test booklet. To indicate an answer choice the student uses a #2 pencil to darken in one of an array of 4 or 5 circles representing the 4 or 5 answer choices for that test item. For primary grade students the answer choice circles are included in the test booklet. The student name and other identifying information are coded on each answer document by either the student or teacher.

D. Machine Scoring

While all answer documents can be hand-scored, the reason for the uniformity in test format and answer sheet design is to allow machine scoring. The benefits of machine scoring are accuracy and the accumulation of data in the computer for the generation of many reports. The machine, however, unlike a teacher, can only read the darkened circles and cannot judge what the student intended.

E. Time Limits

Time limits are imposed for most norm-referenced achievement tests such as CTBS. Other tests, such as District competency tests (SES, PAIR, SHARP, etc.) are not timed and students should be allowed sufficient time to complete the tests.

III. DEVELOPING STUDENT READINESS FOR TEST TAKING

A. Test Content Readiness

Test content readiness implies that a student has received instruction in the knowledge/skills to be tested. To the extent that such skills are within (or below) the curriculum for the grade level being tested, such instruction is the responsibility of teachers and school administrators. Teachers can develop content readiness by including the following in their instructional planning:

1. District Testing Schedules

Be familiar with the testing schedule for the grade level and program. Testing schedules are distributed to each school at the beginning of the school year.

2. Skills Continuums

Identify the skills to be tested (SES, secondary competency tests) and teach them prior to the scheduled testing period.

3. District Course of Study

Make sure all course content is taught to prepare students for achievement tests.

4. Norm-Referenced Test Objectives

Most recently developed tests publish a list of the objectives used to develop items for each test level.

5. California Assessment Program (CAP) Skill Areas Assessed

The State Department of Education produces reports listing the Skill Areas assessed in CAP tests at grades 3, 6 and 12. These reports are distributed to schools as they are received. The most recent report, distributed in Spring, 1980, is titled Survey of Basic Skills: Grade 3, Rationale and Content.

B. Test-Taking Skill Readiness

To do their best on standardized achievement tests, students need to master test-taking skills as well as test content. Students who have had classroom practice in reading and responding to a variety of multiple choice questions and in using separate answer sheets are less apt to suffer anxiety when faced with a standardized testing situation. The following classroom experiences can help assure test-taking skill readiness:

1. Multiple Choice Test Practice

a. Teacher-made tests and other practice materials

The frequent use of teacher-made multiple-choice tests of many types will make students familiar with that format and better prepare them to do their best on the standardized test. Learning to select the "best" answer and darken the circle corresponding to that answer on the answer document is a basic test-taking skill.

The SES Specimen Sets, distributed to all elementary schools by the Office of Elementary Instruction, are specifically designed to give practice in the different skills tested by the SES.

b. Considering all answer choices

One skill which can be developed by the frequent use of multiple-choice tests in the classroom is that of considering all answer choices before choosing the one best answer. The impulsive choice of the first answer which sounds reasonable results in many students receiving lower scores than their knowledge would predict. Students need to understand that all well-designed answer options look reasonable and that a careful reading of each is necessary to select the best answer.

c. Changing answers

It sometimes happens that a student will change his or her mind after marking an answer. On most tests the procedure is to erase the first mark completely and then darken another circle. Since the scoring machine reads pencil marks, and two marks for one question is counted as a "wrong" response, attention to careful erasing should be stressed in all testing practice.

d. Avoiding extraneous marking on answer documents

Again, since the scoring machine reads pencil marks and reads both sides of an answer sheet at one time, any "doodling" or extraneous writing on an answer sheet or booklet may be read by the machine as an answer choice

and possibly invalidate an otherwise correct answer. Students can be taught "why" they should avoid extraneous marking and be provided with scratch paper if computation is required in the testing practice.

e. Checking Answers

A routine procedure for test-wise students is to check their answers when any time remains to do so. In this way the student may remedy any common marking errors -- such as skipping a number--while checking to make sure that the correct response circle was darkened.

2. Practice in Using a Separate Answer Sheet

Beginning with grade 3, students will be expected to read the test booklet and select an answer which they must then code onto a separate answer sheet. The eye/hand coordination which this process requires can be improved by classroom practice. In addition to the answer sheet available with the SES Specimen Sets, it is recommended that teachers use a similar separate answer sheet with teacher-made tests throughout the school year. The District's CTSS answer sheet/scoring system is available to all teachers (625-4919).

3. Practice in Taking "Timed" Tests

Regular practice in taking "timed" tests in the classroom will prepare students for the timed situation of norm-referenced tests such as CTBS and CAP. Several skills are involved in doing well on timed tests:

a. Pacing

Classroom practice in which students are regularly reminded of time intervals which should correspond to their progress through the test is useful in helping students develop their own sense of pacing. This is best done with easy, review or drill questions which do not raise content anxiety.

b. Selective Answer Patterning

A skill which can be taught to older students is that of first quickly answering all those questions which seem easy or take little time to answer and then going back to the other questions as time permits. This strategy prevents spending excessive time on a few hard questions and having insufficient time to complete easier items at the end of the test. However, care must be taken to mark answers in the proper space since some numbers will be skipped.

4. Practice in Following Directions

The rationale for standardized testing is that the instructions to students and all conditions of the testing situation are standardized so that each has an equal chance to do his or her best. Only the student who pays attention and follows directions benefits from standardized testing conditions. While this subject will be addressed in the section on test administration, classroom practice in following directions may be given throughout the year. A simple series of instructions, either written or oral, directed to a class, can help the teacher identify those who need additional help if they are to demonstrate their achievement on a test.

C. Emotional Readiness

The student who has mastery of test content and test-taking skills may still be fearful or anxious when faced with the test. Familiarity with the test situation will help alleviate the anxiety and the following practices will help each student be emotionally ready for testing:

1. Notification

Students and their parents should be notified, in advance, of the testing dates and of the subject matter to be included in the test. This will allow student and parent to prepare for the event (see Student Checklist for Test-Taking). No student should ever be "surprised" by a standardized test.

2. Orientation and Motivation

There is much research which says that a student's orientation or "set" toward a task results in higher achievement. A school or teacher can make the coming test seem important to students and their parents through announcements, discussion and advance preparation. Schoolwide motivating activities, posters and assemblies have been used in some schools to develop test-taking orientation.

IV. PROVIDING FOR OPTIMAL TEST ADMINISTRATION

Where and how tests are administered in a school definitely affects how well the students in that school are able to demonstrate their true achievement level. Attention to the following testing conditions is suggested:

A. THE PHYSICAL SETTING

Prior to the day of testing, a classroom or other location should be selected which has the following characteristics:

1. Seating

Sufficient seating in the testing room will allow a space between students so that one is neither disturbed by the movement of another nor tempted to "share" answers. Younger children perform better in a familiar environment--at their own desks, in their own classroom.

2. Writing Surface

Desks or tables should be of the proper height for the students to be tested. Adequate provisions should be made for left-handed students as well a those who are above or below average height. Lap board are not recommended.

3. Heating, Lighting and Ventilatio

The lighting level should be adequate in all parts of the room where students are to work. Proper heating and/or ventilation should be maintained throughout the testing session.

B. PREPARATION FOR TEST ADMINISTRATION

1. Reading the Reference List

Several copies of a manual of instructions, called a Reference List, are distributed to schools before each testing program. A separate, numbered reference list is produced for every test administration. The Reference List contains the basic information needed to properly conduct the program. Included are testing dates, delivery dates for test materials, the proper test form to use, the testing time required, coding requirements and information on when and where to return test materials for scoring.

No teacher or test administrator should plan the test without consulting the Reference List.

2. Becoming Familiar with the Examiner's Manual

It is not possible to provide for optimal test administration without becoming thoroughly familiar with the Examiner's Manual. The teacher or test administrator should make any marks on the manual which will help to highlight the specific phrases and timing cues which characterize a standardized administration.

3. Becoming Familiar with the Test

Examine the test itself to become familiar with the student's task.

4. Assembling Tests and Test Supplies

Make sure that you have the proper test level and answer sheets for the students to be tested. Have an extra supply of #2 pencils with erasers and have scratch paper when required for mathematics computation. If the test is timed, either a stop watch or a watch or clock with a second-hand should be available in the testing room.

5. Having Students Complete Answer Sheet Identification

If at all possible, have students complete the name block and other identifying data on the answer sheet before the day of testing. Completing this first step without time pressure will allow for thorough checking by the teacher or test administrator.

6. Having a Plan for Students who Finish the Test Early

Early test-finishers can totally disrupt an orderly testing room by bothering others or making them anxious about working more slowly. If you can predict who they might be, plan to seat them so others are not disturbed. Pupils may be reminded to have books or magazines to read in case of finishing the test early.

C. THE DAY OF TESTING

1. Before the Test Administration

a. Remind students to take care of their toilet needs before testing begins.

b. Have students clear their desk or table tops. Once testing begins, only pencils, eraser, test booklet, answer sheet and scratch paper should be on the desk top.

c. To insure that there will be no interruptions during testing, hang a "TESTING -- DO NOT DISTURB" sign outside the testing room door.

d. The teacher or test administrator should put students at ease by proceeding in a calm, relaxed manner. A positive attitude toward testing will encourage a positive attitude on the student's part.

e. Assure students that if they raise their hands during the test, any emergency -- such as a broken pencil -- will be dealt with promptly.

f. Remind students of the planned activity for early test finishers.

2. **The Test Administration**

a. Distribute tests and answer sheets to students in the prescribed manner.

b. Read the test directions exactly as they are written. Speak in a normal voice.

c. Check sample test items completed by students to make sure they understand what the test is asking.

d. Begin the test -- noting the time if the test is to be timed. Mark the starting and finishing times on the chalkboard.

e. Circulate around the testing room to assure that all students are making progress and marking correctly. Be alert for raised hands indicating an "emergency."

f. When time is up, collect test booklets immediately. Have students inspect their answer sheets for complete erasures and dark, solid answer marking. All extraneous pencil marks should be erased.

g. Collect answer sheets, pencils and scratch paper.

3. **After the Test**

a. Inspect answer sheets or booklets for stray marks and wrinkled edges. The proper coding of names and other identification should be checked so that any returning test reports will include the names of all students.

b. Enter, on the answer document, any other identifying data which is required. (See the Reference List for requirements.)

c. Return test booklets, pencils and examiner's manuals to the test coordinator, head counselor, or principal, as directed, for proper storage. Return complete and incomplete answer sheets as directed.

V. A STUDENT CHECKLIST FOR TEST-TAKING

There are some things that only the students and their parents can do to prepare for optimal performance on achievement tests.

- ☐ Know the days and hours when the test will be given.
- ☐ Avoid making medical or other appointments during the testing periods.
- ☐ Get adequate rest on the nights before testing.
- ☐ Have a good breakfast on testing days.
- ☐ Get to school on time on testing days so that any preparation or instructions will not be missed.
- ☐ If you are sick, stay home. Arrange with your teacher for make-up testing.
- ☐ Before the test starts, listen carefully to instructions. If you do not understand, raise your hand and ask a question.
- ☐ When the test starts, work calmly and mark answers carefully. Use the test-taking skills your teacher has taught you.
- ☐ When the test is over, check your answer sheet and erase any marks that are not your answer choices.
- ☐ Parents and students should inquire to find out when test results are available. An appointment may be made to review the students' scores and other school achievement information.

For assistance, please call Marilyn Burns or Frank Jost, 625-6207.

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